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Inside the nonstop pressure campaign by Trump allies to get election officials to revisit the 2020 vote

Well-funded allies of the former president have gained audiences with top state officials to push for examinations of the vote, and local residents...

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Well-funded allies of the former president have gained audiences with top state officials to push for examinations of the vote, and local residents have bombarded election administrators with their own demands to investigate.

More than a year after Donald Trump lost the presidency, election officials across the country are facing a growing barrage of claims that the vote was not secure and demands to investigate or decertify the outcome, efforts that are eating up hundreds of hours of government time and spreading distrust in elections.

The ongoing attack on the vote is being driven in part by well-funded Trump associates, who have gained audiences with top state officials and are pushing to inspect protected machines and urging them to conduct audits or sign on to a lawsuit seeking to overturn the 2020 results. And the campaign is being bolstered by grass-roots energy, as local residents who have absorbed baseless allegations of ballot fraud are now forcing election administrators to address the false claims.

The fallout has spread from the six states where Trump sought to overturn the outcome in 2020 to deep-red places such as Idaho, where officials recently hand-recounted ballots in three counties to refute claims of vote-flipping, and Oklahoma, where state officials commissioned an investigation to counter allegations that voting machines were hacked.

State and local officials said no one has presented actual evidence that rampant fraud tainted the 2020 election, and numerous ballot reviews and legal proceedings have affirmed that the vote was secure. Yet they and their staffs have been forced into a high-stakes game of whack-a-mole, debunking a steady stream of false allegations only to see similar claims emerge again from other groups or in other states.

The onslaught is exhausting and troubling, officials said, as they launch preparations for the 2022 midterm elections — and is further eroding faith in the nation's voting systems.

"If we want to continue to provide safe, secure and accessible elections, constantly running down absurd conspiracy theories is not sustainable," said Patrick Gannon, a spokesman for the North Carolina State Board of Elections. "For many election workers, this has become a full-time job."

Among those leading the efforts against the 2020 presidential election are MyPillow founder Mike Lindell — who said in an interview last week that he has spent \$25 million promoting claims of election fraud — and one of his associates, Douglas Frank, a longtime math and science teacher in Ohio who claims to have discovered secret algorithms used to rig the 2020 election.

Throughout the year, the two men have been pressing their case with state and local election officials around the country and gaining meetings with many of them, according to people familiar with their activities.

In Ohio, Frank met for more than two hours in May with the senior staff of Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose (R), presenting unsubstantiated claims that voting machines are connected to the Internet and have been hacked, according to a recording of the meeting obtained by The Washington Post. Frank warned that he planned to pursue multiple legal actions around the country and said there could be consequences if LaRose's office did not cooperate.

"I'm warning you that I've been going around the country. We're starting lawsuits everywhere," Frank said, according to the recording. "And I want you guys to be allies, not opponents. I want to be on your team, and I'm warning you."

After the meeting, LaRose posted a video on Facebook reiterating that under state law, no voting machines are connected to any network.

The doubts that Lindell, Frank and other Trump allies have whipped up about the vote have taken root across the country.

In North Carolina this fall, local activists and at least two Republican lawmakers sent the State Board of Elections allegations, including an outlandish claim that all 100 county election systems were hacked in 2020 and thousands of votes for Trump switched to Joe Biden. Election staffers and the state's cybersecurity team compiled dozens of pages of responses disproving the charges, one at a time.

And in Marion County, Fla., this fall, some local residents conducted their own canvass of 2020 voters and presented their findings to election officials, claiming that many who cast ballots were "ghost" voters who didn't actually live at the addresses listed on their registrations.

As in other instances, their claims were debunked. Wesley Wilcox (R), the Marion County elections supervisor, said the activists made the "absurd" claim that the number of voters who were registered but did not cast ballots in 2020 was evidence of fraud. He noted that the objectors did not provide the name of a single voter who was improperly registered at the time of last year's election.

"They're trying to prove voter fraud off of nonexistent issues," Wilcox said.

Even as election officials rebut the growing conspiracy theories, the demands from some of those pushing false claims are escalating — and their rhetoric is becoming more extreme.

On social media, Frank recently began calling for prison or "firing squads" for those found guilty of "treason," stating in one post that "history will not look kindly on state officials who turned a blind eye to the massive election fraud that took place in 2020." On Dec. 18, he wrote that Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, a Democrat who has refused to entertain his claims, should face a jury "capable of dispensing capital punishment."

In an interview last week, Benson said she views the latest escalation as an assault on democracy. She said she intends to spend next year fighting back, and urging Americans to do the same.

Benson called the pressure on election officials "a political strategy to break down our democracy and put people in charge of our states who are unaccountable and will act in a way that doesn't reflect the will of the people."

Asked Tuesday about his comments, Frank said that after he and others who share his view about 2020 "win the war," election officials such as Benson should face trial — adding that federal law calls for traitors to be subject to capital punishment.

"After the Nuremberg trials, there were hangings and firing squads," Frank wrote in an email, referring to the military tribunals that tried Nazi leaders after World War II. In an interview, he added that he believes it is critical for officials to investigate elections to restore faith in their outcome: "I firmly believe they are not fair and free. I believe they are being manipulated."

Lindell previously told The Post that he has hired Frank for some projects but that he is not aware of all of his activities. In an interview last week, Lindell said he is working hard to protect democracy and prays for people who believe that he's undermining it.

"What happened in 2020 was completely the biggest crime in the history of the United States, probably the world," he told The Post. "I'm not backing down, and I hope you wouldn't, and anyone wouldn't in this country, if they knew what I knew."

Asked about the fraudulent claims and incendiary rhetoric used by his allies, Trump spokeswoman Liz Harrington said in a statement that the former president "supports any patriotic American who dedicates their time and effort to exposing the rigged 2020 Presidential Election."

Leading the charge

Trump is leading the ongoing assault on the integrity of the 2020 election, regularly firing off statements in which he falsely asserts that the vote was rigged and using the issue as a litmus test for which candidates he endorses.

In a statement Tuesday, he said that the real "insurrection" happened not on Jan. 6, when a mob of his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol, but on Nov. 3, the day Americans elected Biden.

When Frank met with LaRose's senior staffers in May, he twice told them that he would be calling the former president immediately afterward to provide an update, according to the recording.

Frank told The Post last week that when he told Ohio officials he would be calling the former president, he didn't mean it literally. He said he meant to show that he had connections to powerful people who could be helpful.

"I didn't mean it as a threat. I meant it as an opportunity," he said.

In June, Frank spoke at a Trump rally in Ohio, despite the objections of some Trump aides, who opposed his making a dry PowerPoint presentation about fraud theories to the crowd, according to people familiar with the event. Backstage, Frank conferred with the former president and a number of his advisers, according to a person who was present. Frank has separately spoken to Harrington, an adviser said.

In a text to The Post, Frank disputed that he spoke to the former president at the rally.

Lindell interviewed Trump at his Florida club this fall for a show streamed on Lindell's website, and the former president has praised the MyPillow executive for "fighting" for him, a Trump adviser said.

At the Trump rally in Ohio this summer, Lindell could be heard telling throngs of Trump fans that he would be showing more evidence "soon" as they mobbed him for photos.

Frank has been open in his quest to recruit state and local officials to his cause. He has told The Post in recent months that he has visited "over 30 states" and has met with about 100 election administrators. In April, he spoke to Tina Peters, the clerk in Mesa County, Colo., "and showed her how her election was hacked," Frank previously told The Post.

The following month, Peters (R) allegedly brought an outsider into her election offices to copy the hard drives of voting machines, an episode now under criminal investigation. Peters has said that she gave access to the outsider to help preserve election records and that doing so was within the scope of her responsibilities.

Lindell told The Post that he has spoken to "20 to 30" Republican attorneys general in a bid to persuade them to sign on to a lawsuit asking the Supreme Court to nullify the 2020 results in key states Biden won. He announced in early November his plans to file the suit two days before Thanksgiving, but the date came and went and no attorney general had agreed to do so. Lindell posted the complaint online without named plaintiffs and, without offering proof, accused Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel of sabotaging his effort.

Lindell said Tuesday that he remains in regular contact with about a dozen attorneys general, whom he declined to name, and that he still expects them to file a revised version of the lawsuit. He said that his claims about McDaniel were based on something he heard, and not on evidence. But, he added, "the RNC collects a lot of money, and never did anything for the election crimes."

In a statement, RNC spokeswoman Danielle Alvarez called his criticism "reckless and completely false," saying the national party financed 50 election-related lawsuits in the last election cycle and is pursuing more than 30 suits now.

"We will continue to act and get results while others continue to do nothing more than talk," she said.

Numerous election security experts have dismissed the fraud allegations made by Lindell and Frank, but the claims have found traction among some Republican legislators.

In North Carolina this fall, a Republican state lawmaker sent officials an ominous-looking map of the state showing red lines identified as "remote connections" emanating like laser beams from all of the state's 100 counties.

State officials said there is no merit to the document, which attributes the information to retired Army colonel Phil Waldron, another Trump ally who has challenged the results of the election.

"The State Board continues to have no credible evidence of the 2020 general election results being manipulated in any way," said Gannon, whose office has received dozens of inquiries demanding forensic audits and explanations about the vote.

Earlier this month, Waldron was revealed to have briefed some members of Congress ahead of the congressional certification of the vote on Jan. 6 with a PowerPoint presentation that proposed options for replacing or rejecting Democratic electors in "states where fraud occurred."

Waldron did not respond to a request for comment.

The "remote connections" chart, along with other documents, were sent to North Carolina officials by state Rep. George Cleveland (R). He asked for a "complete" explanation of what had happened in the election, according to emails obtained by The Post through a public-records request.

Gannon responded with detailed explanations, not only from his office but also from the North Carolina National Guard, which runs the state's Cyber Security Response Force and is responsible for monitoring election security. In response to one claim alleging manipulation of vote counts, the State Board of Elections wrote, "The allegation is so vague as to be incomprehensible."

In an interview, Cleveland said he was satisfied that North Carolina's system was not hacked. But he said he remains convinced that the 2020 election was rigged in other places — a common position among those who have been convinced that there was no widespread fraud in their own states.

"When I first saw Frank's presentation on the polynomial thing, I was impressed," Cleveland said, referring to the claim that an algorithm Frank calls a "6th-degree polynomial" was used to rig the 2020 results. "He did a very good job. But after I've looked into some other things and talked to other people, until he will give his data and his methodology to others to prove what he's saying, I'm going to be very skeptical."

'They seek me out'

Lindell held a "cyber symposium" in August where he showcased claims of fraud and spent the ensuing weeks meeting with officials who asked him to present them with his evidence, he told The Post. In September, he told The Post that he had met with officials in states including Florida, Missouri, Alabama, North Dakota and South Dakota.

"I've been going state to state and showing them evidence directly, and they all want to do audits," Lindell said at the time.

Frank said he is often asked for help by local activists who have seen his presentations online or his posts on the social media site Telegram.

"Someone will call from a state and say, 'Dr. Frank, our elections are ripped off. Will you come help us?' " he told The Post last month. "They seek me out; I'm not seeking them out."

After he gives a talk in a community, Frank said, "hundreds of people are now motivated, or maybe a thousand people are motivated by my talk, and they start canvassing, calling legislators and calling county officials. They call me back and say, 'Hey, we'd like you to come meet with this legislator and this county clerk.' "

He said he has met personally with numerous state officials, including Missouri Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft (R). On Dec. 1, Frank wrote on Telegram that he had "negotiated a deal" in which Ashcroft "agreed to take up the cause if we brought him 100 phantom voters."

Ashcroft declined to comment, as did several other Republican officials whom Lindell or Frank said they contacted.

Other state officials have handled the outreach gingerly by agreeing to listen to the election deniers but then stating publicly that there is no evidence of fraud.

Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill (R) said in an interview that he met with Lindell and Frank twice this fall — and traveled to Trump's private club in Florida this month to meet with the former president. Merrill described the meetings as cordial and said he is always willing to meet with anyone, but he also said that the allegations of a rigged election did not have merit.

Lindell claimed to have IP addresses and passwords proving that Alabama elections systems had been hacked, but he did not present any in the meeting, Merrill said. The dozens of voters registered to a single address that Lindell said proved that the voter rolls were fraudulent were actually residents of Big Oak Ranch, a well-known community where children from troubled homes live with foster families.

Merrill said he personally knows a couple of the voters living at Big Oak Ranch whose names were presented to him as evidence of fraud.

"A simple Google check would have told you what these places are," Merrill recalled telling the pair. "Instead you reached a supposition that voter fraud occurred."

Frank acknowledged that the meeting did not go well. "We have since changed our approach as a result," he said.

In an interview Tuesday, Lindell continued to insist that more than 100,000 votes were flipped from Trump to Biden in Alabama, and he alleged that since his meeting with Merrill, his investigators uncovered more vulnerabilities in Alabama's electronic poll books.

"We're going to be circling back to Alabama, obviously, long before the 2022 election and show him that the machines are defective," Lindell said.

After the meeting, Merrill said he sent letters to every registrar, court clerk, probate judge and sheriff in the state, warning them not to provide information to Lindell or Frank that is not readily available to the public because state law forbids it. Merrill said he is not aware of anyone doing so and that if it happens, "I will personally contact the district attorney in that circuit and seek an indictment."

In Ohio, Frank got an audience with LaRose's staff after connecting with Joe Blystone, who is challenging Gov. Mike DeWine for the GOP nomination in part on a platform claiming that fraud tainted the state's elections last year. Blystone in turn made contact with someone he knew in LaRose's office and requested a meeting, according to both Frank and Blystone, the latter confirming in an interview that he set up and attended the meeting.

In the meeting, Frank claimed he had abundant evidence, but when staff members asked to see it, he said it was coming soon, according to the recording. At one point, Frank said voters in Ohio were sent absentee ballots without requesting them — a recipe for fraud, he argued.

State officials pushed back, explaining that voters actually received forms to request absentee ballots, not the ballots themselves. Frank quickly backtracked, conceding he did not yet have the evidence about the ballots, according to the recording.

At other moments, Frank suggested there could be political consequences for LaRose if he did not cooperate, according to the recording. He said he would like to send a forensic team to find evidence of fraud by inspecting voting systems. And he claimed there are people — "plants," he called them — across the country collecting proof that voting machines are connected to the Internet and therefore susceptible to being hacked.

"We can arrange for that" in Ohio, he said, according to the recording.

Frank told The Post that all of his comments were offered in the spirit of helping Ohio officials expose fraud and that he was disappointed they did not take him up on that offer. He also claimed to know of evidence of election fraud that has not been presented publicly because of national security sensitivities.

LaRose spokesman Rob Nichols said the office denied Frank's requests, but he added that the secretary's office is open to meeting with any group claiming to have evidence of voting irregularities and did not find Frank's inquiries burdensome.

In an interview in November, LaRose offered a blunt assessment of Frank's theories.

Almost nobody "knows what a sixth-order polynomial even is, and it's got nothing to do with how elections are run," LaRose said. "But it sounds impressive, and if you have a preconceived sort of notion about what you want to believe and somebody with a title tells you a bunch of things, this is what conspiracy theories are based on."

Even in states that Trump won overwhelmingly, officials have been compelled to address fraud claims.

After Lindell's symposium in August, Oklahoma lawmakers under pressure from their constituents asked State Election Board Secretary Paul Ziriaux about Lindell's claim that tens of thousands of votes were flipped in each of Oklahoma's 77 counties.

Ziriaux requested an independent investigation that found no merit to those claims, he told members of the state legislature in a letter in October.

In Idaho, Chief Deputy Secretary of State Chad Houck (R) said he has not spoken with Lindell or Frank but that his office has fielded phone calls and emails from people asking what state officials planned to do about assertions on Lindell's website that the results were electronically manipulated in all 44 counties in Idaho.

Houck said he knew that the claim was bogus but that he didn't want to just say so — he wanted to show it. So in late September, state officials conducted a full hand-recount of ballots in two small counties, which showed that there was no vote-flipping, as Lindell alleged. They filmed the process, posted footage online and issued a news release.

In early October, they counted a sample of ballots in a larger county, and Houck issued a second news release declaring Lindell's claims "without merit."

"It takes hard work to build confidence in a state's elections system, and careless accusations like this can cause tremendous harm. Doing nothing and saying nothing would have been like conceding its truth," Houck said in a statement at the time.

That posture was an unpopular one for Houck, who recently dropped out of the running for secretary of state in the deeply Republican state. But he said it was important to speak out.

"You put the facts out and you let the chips fall where they may," he told The Post.

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Correction: A previous version of this article incorrectly said that Idaho Chief Deputy Secretary of State Chad Houck is running for secretary of state. In fact, Houck dropped out of the race on Dec. 17, citing family reasons.

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